Sniper's Roommate Questioned By F.B.I. and Then Released

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NEW ORLEANS, Jan. 10 — The police questioned today the roommate of Mark Essex, the slain New Orleans sniper, but released him without charges.

The roommate, Rodney Frank, had disappeared from the suburban apartment that he and Essex had used as a mail drop and occasional home base since last summer, when Essex came to New Orleans from Emporia, Kan.

The police, seeking to establish whether Essex was part of a conspiracy to murder policemen, had sought Mr. Frank since yesterday morning.

The police would not comment and Mr. Frank was not available for comment.

Three policemen, two hotel guests and a hotel employe were killed and 10 policemen and two firemen were wounded by a sniper or snipers shooting from the Downtown Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge last Sunday. Essex was shot and killed on the hotel roof by policemen riding in a helicopter.

Friends reported that Mr. Frank, a Black Muslim, had spent a lot of time in Muhammad's mosque No. 36 conferring with his minister, George 4X, and associates. The religion forbids any wrongdoing by its members, and Mr. Frank first convinced his fellow police that he had nothing to do with his roommate's shooting spree.

Friends said that Mr. Frank had served with Essex in the Navy, where both were dental technicians. Essex came to New Orleans with Mr. Frank in February, 1971, after their discharge from the Navy and returned to live last summer, the friends said.

Funerals for Victims

While the police investigation of the weekend snipings was continuing, families of three slain officers held funerals for the victims.

Deputy Police Superintendent Louis J. Sirgo was buried this morning, and patrolman Phil Coleman was buried this afternoon. Patrolman Paul Persigo was buried yesterday.

An emerging pattern of Essex's behavior indicated that he was a "loner."

A minister in Emporia, Kan., described Essex as a young man who returned from the Navy in 1971 hating white people.

Policemen in New Orleans said they have determined that a rifle found alongside Essex's body last Monday was used in sniping incidents against the police here on New Year's Eve.

A police cadet was killed at the police station on that night, and two policemen were wounded.

The manager of the Montgomery Ward's store in Emporia, Essex's home town, reported that Essex bought the .44-caliber Magnum rifle there last April.

Owned 2 Cars

The Kansas authorities reported late today that Essex had bought two automobiles in Kansas since his discharge from the Navy.

Both cars, a 1955 Buick purchased on June 30, 1971, and a 1962 Chevrolet bought last July 29, are still registered in his name.

The police also continued an investigation into the shooting last Sunday morning of a 33-year-old grocer, Joseph S. Perniciaro, who ran a small shop in a negro residential section.

Mr. Perniciaro was reported by neighbors to have been shot by a Negro assailant Sunday morning, and several police sources have said that the authorities believe Mr. Perniciaro was about to identify Essex as the man who shot the policemen and police cadet on New Year's Eve.

The police would not say how seriously wounded Mr. Perniciaro was, nor whether he was still alive.

Neighbors said they understood that Mr. Perniciaro was killed.

No hospital in New Orleans would acknowledge having a patient named Joseph S. Perniciaro.

Linked to Stolen Car

Sources close to the police said that a young Negro shot Mr. Perniciaro with a rifle at his store, then ran northward to a spot near the New Orleans Central Police Station, where he stole a car that had been left at a curb with the engine running.

The owner of the car, who saw it being stolen notified the police, who spotted the car and chased it, but lost it in heavy downtown traffic. The car was found abandoned Sunday night on the fourth floor of the hotel's parking lot.

The authorities would not say whether they had traced several bags of ammunition found on the hotel roof when officers stormed it Monday afternoon.

Mr. McMillan said the same shouts were heard by a Times-Picaun photographer, Philip Ames, and by Furnell Chapman, a television newsman.

Mr. McMillan said that about 4 A.M. Monday, after police riflemen had fired into a concrete bunker atop the roof, he heard a man shouting, "I'm still here!"

About an hour or an hour and half later, Mr. McMillan said, the man could be heard shouting in a stairwell.